

Superintendent's Entry Plan

Liam Skinner

Lowell Public Schools

August 11, 2023

Dear Lowell Public Schools Community,

It has been a privilege to serve as a teacher, principal and Assistant Superintendent in Lowell Public Schools for the past three decades and I am proud to assume the role of Interim Superintendent. I will work tirelessly for this community and its overall well being. I look forward to partnering with our entire community to provide every child the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Although my previous roles have given me a deep knowledge of our schools, and the needs of our district, I have a lot to learn. And because I intend to operate in an open and collaborative manner, there are many stakeholders and community groups whose perspectives and partnership I seek.

My entry plan sets out how I'll work to better understand and address the needs of the community by meeting with representatives of local government and community groups to build relationships, foster support, and create a collaborative and inclusive environment conducive to positive educational outcomes for all students. A second feature of the plan addresses my need to understand central office functioning from the lens of the superintendent. Particularly due to concerns identified by our School Committee, I want to assess the current structure, and any gaps in our services. Gaining a deeper understanding will help me meet the demand for a sensible, efficient organizational model that fits the particular needs of our urban district, its schools, families and students. A third emphasis of the entry plan is on maintaining and advancing school improvement work I initiated or was involved in as Assistant Superintendent. Referred to as developing a 'culture of continuous improvement', the related actions are intended to foster the instructional leadership skills of principals and assistant principals, support teachers in their professional growth, and highlight the imperative of eliminating disparities in student outcomes based on race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

My aim in undertaking this entry process is to learn more about the district and community, to gain a deeper understanding of the current conditions of the system and to identify areas for further development and growth. I see the entry plan as a set of commitments to address specific needs of our school district and community, but also as a commitment to develop a collaborative culture where the voices of our faculty, staff and community are reflected in planning and decision-making.

Thank you for the opportunity to partner with you in this entry process. The details of this plan can be found in the accompanying pages of this document.

Sincerely,



Liam Skinner

Interim Superintendent of Schools

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Introduction

The purpose of the entry plan is to outline the process I will use to learn more about Lowell Public Schools in my new role as Superintendent. In undertaking this process, I want to learn more about the district and community, to gain a deeper understanding of the current conditions of the system and to identify areas for further study that will lead to the development of strategy for growth. I see the entry plan as an opportunity to learn more about our school system through a new lens and, at the same time, establish productive relationships with community partners and with my central office colleagues.

The plan also constitutes a process that will enable me, as the new Interim Superintendent to:

- establish a strong community presence
- guide planning to address critical needs
- identify further critical issues
- create a network of collaborative partners
- protect and advance key ongoing initiatives
- create ideas for sustaining and strengthening LPS for the future

My plan will reflect the core values, beliefs and commitments as outlined LPS's Strategic Plan 2020 - 2025:

Core Beliefs

- 1) A high quality education is a fundamental civil right of every child we serve.
- 2) Teaching and learning are at the core of our work. Everything we do must support what happens in the classroom.
- 3) Parents are our partners. They are our students' first teachers in the home.
- 4) There is no silver bullet to improving our schools. Sustainable school improvement requires hard and steady work over time.
- 5) Every adult in the system is accountable for the success of our students. Putting every child on a path to college and career success is the responsibility of the entire community.

Fundamental Commitments

- Eliminate the racial, ethnic and linguistic achievement and opportunity gaps among all students
- Provide equitable funding and resources among the district's diverse schools
- Engage all families with courtesy, dignity, respect and cultural understanding.

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Context and Background

As Chief Schools Officer for LPS in the past two years, and 22 years as a middle school principal before that, I have a deep understanding of the district's needs, priorities and goals. In particular, I have played an active role operationalizing a maxim of educational researcher and consultant, Jon Saphier: "Schools that produce better student learning follow one common route: they pay attention to the improvement of teaching." As Chief Schools Officer, my work with Lowell principals was heavily tilted towards supporting them to be instructional leaders, so to effectively support their teachers' professional growth. This work is the highest leverage school improvement strategy and will remain the heart of my efforts as superintendent.

There are, however, numerous aspects of superintendency I have yet to learn. This entry plan is an opportunity for me to listen to and learn from the many stakeholders. Although I have built strong relationships with administrators, teachers, staff, parents and the School Committee, I understand the importance of continuing to establish myself in this new leadership role.

Data Sources

I will use four types of sources in order to gather information about the Lowell Public Schools:

- 1) Individual interviews, focus groups and forums with stakeholders
- 2) Surveys
- 3) Observations of schools and classrooms
- 4) A review of key documents and data, including but not limited to:
 - School Improvement Plans
 - District Strategic Plan
 - HALS and OA Dashboards
 - School and District Report Cards (DESE)
 - School Discipline Reports (DESE)
 - District/School MCAS Analysis
 - Collective Bargaining Agreements
 - Budget Documents

Data Analysis

Throughout the entry plan process, and as I review data from the sources above, I'll consider the following key questions:

1. What are the strengths of our school system and our community?
2. What are the biggest challenges that we currently face?
3. As we think about our schools in the next 5-10 years, what should our goals be for the future?

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4. What must we protect or sustain in our system?
5. What are our biggest opportunities for growth?
6. What are the opportunity and achievement gaps that we need to address?

The data collected will be reviewed and trends and patterns will be identified. These trends and patterns will form the basis of regular updates I will provide to the School Committee and will inform the work as we develop further plans for district improvement focused on teaching and learning.

Part I. Building Public Trust and Confidence with Key Community Stakeholders

My prior roles in the district have enabled me to form strong working relationships with school administrators, and to understand the needs of schools. I have only limited experience in working with local government officials or community groups. Developing strong, positive relationships with these constituents is essential for collaboration, trust-building, and effective communication. Because community groups often represent specific interests, concerns, and needs of various segments of the population, engaging with them will provide valuable insights into their priorities and challenges. This will help ensure that I consider the perspectives of different demographics and backgrounds, leading to more informed, inclusive and equitable decision-making.

Key Actions

1. Contact key community leaders to introduce myself and begin establishing a working relationship. [Including but not limited to City Manager, Police Chief, Fire Chief, Health Department, Chancellor of UMass Lowell, President of Middlesex Community College]
2. Schedule one-on-one meetings with key personnel, including individual School Committee members, district leadership, principals, and union representatives, to build rapport and understand their roles and expectations.
3. Engage with community organizations and businesses to establish partnerships and support for the district's goals. [Including but not limited to: Project Learn, Latinx Community Center for Empowerment, Fortaleza, Boys & Girls Club, Greater Lowell Community Foundation, Enterprise bank, The Lowell Plan, UTEC, faith-based leaders]
4. Assess the quality, quantity, and effectiveness of all existing forms of communication with various stakeholders: School Committee, Families, Teachers, Support Staff, Administrative Staff, Student Leaders, Community Leaders, Business Leaders, and Faith-based Leaders.
5. Hold periodic and ongoing media briefings and establish routine communication protocols and meeting protocols.

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6. Avail of opportunities for meetings with teachers, students, families, and leaders as a routine activity for personal communication about critical issues facing our organization.
7. Attend pre-existing meeting structures to engage the community (High School planning, meetings with city manager, etc.).

Sample Interview Questions for Stakeholders:

1. What do you see as the strengths and needs of our school district?
2. What are your expectations for the superintendent's role in the community?
3. How can the district better engage with parents and community members to foster collaboration and support for students?
4. What are the most significant challenges facing our schools, and what do you think should be done to address them?
5. How can the district enhance communication and transparency with parents and community stakeholders?
6. What are your thoughts on diversity, equity, and inclusion in our schools, and how can we work together to create a more inclusive environment?
7. How can the district better involve families and community members in decision-making processes?
8. What is your vision for the district's future, and how can we work together to achieve it?

Part II. Assessing Central Office Structure and Functioning

Community members, including members of our School Committee, have lamented perceived gaps in central office services, specifically those that traditionally were offered by a Student Support Services department. In the meantime, central office has grown in ways the School Committee questions. Prior to making recommendations for change, it is crucial that I gain a full understanding of our current organizational structure and functioning.

Key Actions

1. Engage Cabinet Members: With each of the central office chiefs - Chief Academic Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Equity Officer, Chief Schools Officer, Chief Financial Officer - study the purpose and role of their office in the current organizational design.
2. Understand Roles and Responsibilities: Study roles and responsibilities for each position within central office. Consider where there may be overlaps and whether everyone understands their specific tasks and areas of authority. Consider collaboration among departments.

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3. Examine Supervision and Professional Development structures: Study administrative supervision and professional development structures for central office staff. Assess the level of administrative supervision, shared leadership, and professional development provided for these groups.
4. Engage Stakeholders: Involve key stakeholders, including principals, teachers, parents, and community members, in an assessment of central office functions that are important to them. Seek their input, concerns, and suggestions.
5. Clarify Objectives: Examine objectives and goals for our organizational model. Determine what outcomes central office is intended to achieve, including support to schools, communication, hiring, budgeting and resource allocation.
6. Consider Best Practices: Research and benchmark against other successful school districts or organizations that have implemented sensible and efficient central office models. Learn from their experiences and consider what best practices align with our district's unique needs and context.

Part III. Maintaining and Advancing Current School Improvement Initiatives By Fostering a Culture of Continuous Improvement

In my time as a school principal, I found ways to operationalize a maxim of educational researcher and consultant, Jon Saphier: “Schools that produce better student learning follow one common route: they pay attention to the improvement of teaching.”. As Chief Schools Officer, my work with Lowell principals was heavily tilted towards supporting them to be instructional leaders, so to effectively support their teachers’ professional growth. This work is the highest leverage school improvement strategy and will remain at the heart of my efforts as superintendent. As I enter the superintendency, I will continue to foster the instructional leadership skills of principals and assistant principals so that they support teachers in their professional growth, and take meaningful steps to eliminate disparities in student outcomes based on race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Key Actions

1. Actively participate in planning and presenting Leadership Academy. This is our professional development forum for administrators, occurring over three days in August followed by a further day each month throughout the school year. It is critical that we leverage this opportunity for focused efforts on instructional leadership.
2. Hire an interim Chief Schools Officer and onboard the successful candidate. The new CSO will spend the bulk of their time coaching principals while working alongside them in schools. Through the onboarding process guide the CSO in goal-setting for coaching work, as well as for other key activities such as Instructional Rounds.

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3. Maintain a cadence of school visits. Visit at least 10 schools per month to work with principals, assess their progress with instructional leadership goals and improvement work more generally.
4. Actively participate in the Instructional Rounds process. I will remain an active participant in at least one Instructional Rounds visit per month.
5. Support the production of a comprehensive professional development plan by working with central office staff and school leaders to determine needs. Plan for the provision of appropriate resources, including time, so that professional development efforts are coordinated and effective.

Culmination of the Plan

I will engage the School Committee in ongoing dialogue throughout the entry plan process and will report findings to the Committee in prompt fashion. Information provided to the Committee will contain a combination of qualitative, anecdotal and quantitative data.

Expected Outcomes

It is anticipated that the implementation of this entry plan will result in the following outcomes, enabling me to make informed decisions and recommendations:

- 1) Summarized findings from all surveys, reviews and assessments of the district's programs, process systems, human resources, working environments and finances
- 2) Assessment of central office organizational structure and identification of any design or staffing changes needed to ensure optimal productivity, efficacy and efficiency
- 3) A foundational understanding from which to begin facilitating short and long-range planning in identified key areas

It is my desire, not just through this entry but also beyond, to remain open to the input and feedback of stakeholders in the community. I look forward to working collaboratively to positively influence the educational experience for each child in Lowell Public Schools.